

But though I should like to go on and tell you much more about Easter ceremonies, I must draw this to an end. I hope at least you can see what can be done. And yet I feel I have been only scratching the surface, because whatever we do must be inadequate when we think of the liturgy, so vast, so wonderful, so mysterious. It means we must pray very hard about it all.

St Dositheus

SISTER FELICITY P.C.C.

'He was well to do and lived a careless and worldly life in a military circle'. Dositheus is not the only young man to be described in these terms in any century. It is safe to say he is not the only one to have been converted by the fear of eternal punishment either. Perhaps in the twentieth century when the notion of hell is considered a naive superstition, such a conversion may be more rare, but Dositheus was born around the middle of the sixth when (we are pleased to think) people were not so civilized and enlightened.

The young man heard from his friends and soldier acquaintances a great deal of talk about Jerusalem and made up his mind to visit the city and see for himself whether 'army language' was exaggerating its attractions. He toured the chief sights and was duly impressed, but it was a flamboyant painting depicting the tortures of the damned that made him stand still and stare in Gethsemane. Since Dositheus presumably knew nothing and cared less about eternal life he was very puzzled by this picture and stood gazing at it, attracted and repelled at the same time.

Suddenly it was imperative that he should find out what the lurid representation of human torment was all about. He turned to an elderly lady kneeling in prayer and interrupted her devotions to ask for an explanation. Nothing loth she gave him a great-aunt's lecture on the Four Last Things that left him almost speechless. The joys of heaven were, as to all over-sophisticated young men, incomprehensible to Dositheus. Everlasting happiness without wine, women and song?—Impossible. The pains of hell on the other hand needed very little

imagination. He had seen men die; and heard them. One was glad when it was over and the lifeless mass could no longer writhe and shriek. But what if it was never over? If indeed, as this sober and earnest woman told him, the body could die but somewhere else the death agony was for ever prolonged, something must be done about it.

Dositheus had no illusions about himself. He did not console himself by saying: 'Oh, well, I'm no saint but I'm not as bad as all that'. He knew nothing about saints anyway. So convinced was he of the reality of hell and his own deserts that he besought his instructress to tell him how to avoid such a terrible fate. She told him he must fast and pray and Dositheus became a doer of the word as well as a hearer in double quick time.

His amazed friends observed him frequenting churches, receiving instruction in the Christian faith, cutting out many of his usual attendances at the circus, the amphitheatre, the baths; turning a blind eye to the blandishments of ladies of easy virtue. 'O-ho', said the friends, 'You had better go and be a monk'. And Dositheus who had not thought of it before thanked them very much for the suggestion and said he would.

Abbot Seridon of Gaza was a little disconcerted at the first sight of this aspirant to the monastic life. Too well dressed he thought. Too delicately brought up he was afraid. Too young and too lacking in stamina he doubted not. The earnestness the young applicant brought to bear, however, reassured the abbot who accepted him and handed him over to the care of one of his monks, Dorotheus.

This holy man being a very experienced director soon took the postulant's measure. As Dositheus was not robust he was not introduced to a rigorous asceticism right away but allowed to do as much as he felt inclined in the matter at first. His master insisted rather on the necessity of silence and of overcoming impatience, moodiness and self-will in all its manifestations. Dorotheus taught that the perfect renunciation of the will in all things was more important than fasting, but his pupil was allowed to decrease his daily intake of food when he felt able. In time we are told Dositheus was managing to exist on eight ounces of bread instead of his customary six pounds a day. How anyone could consume six pounds of the hard ship's biscuit kind of bread baked by the Desert Fathers is hard to imagine. For all his delicate upbringing Dositheus must have had good teeth and a schoolboy appetite.

Eventually he was given the care of the sick and—heartening for those who have had a similar charge—he was sometimes impatient with their querulous demands and spoke sharply. Even so his patients loved

him because of his cheerfulness and kindness. He regretted his lapses into irritability so much that he would run to his cell and weep till his master arrived with words of counsel and comfort. It is to be hoped that the sick were not left shouting for the necessities of the sick-bed while he was thus occupied, for he was himself to know the penance of being dependent on others soon enough.

It was not long before Dositheus fell ill, apparently from phthisis. He was ravaged by constant haemorrhages from the lungs and the deadly weakness characteristic of the disease. The sole exterior practice of penance that remained to him was to deny his own will and in this he continued to the end. Dorotheus urged him, when he was capable of no further physical effort, to hold on to prayer, but there came a time when the sick monk felt he could pray no longer and admitted as much. Dorotheus reassured him. 'Give up the effort then, my son, but keep God in mind as ever present beside thee'. And then as Dositheus sank lower his master spoke again. 'Depart in peace; thou shalt appear in joy before the holy Trinity, and there pray for us'.

Several of the brethren took umbrage at Dorotheus. Imagine promising a priority passage to heaven to a man who had never fasted—not in the way they understood fasting at any rate—and performed no miracles. But Dorotheus, doubtless remembering that the Lord pronounced no strictures on those who do not fast, said mildly: 'It is true, my dear brothers, that he did not fast, but he completely surrendered his own will'. As if to endorse these words a very holy old man visited the monastery and while there asked God to show him the departed brethren who had gone straight to heaven. In a vision he saw a choir of aged monks and in their midst one young man . . . So accurately did he describe this young man afterwards that everyone recognized the holy lay brother Dositheus.

There is a striking parallel between the life of this sixth century young monk who was never officially canonised by the Eastern or the Western Church and the nineteenth century canonised young nun, Teresa of Lisieux. The same incapacity for harsh exterior austerities, the same disease, the same abandonment to the will of God. Even the attitude of the Lisieux community is similar to that of Gaza. 'What will our Mother find to say about her? She is a good little nun but she has never done anything worthy of notice'.

It is significant or at least remarkable that the saintly aunt whose influence on Teresa's early life was so marked (and who evidently lived by the *Little Way* long before her niece called it by its name and made

it famous) was known in religion as Sister Marie Dosithée. Surely this is a glimpse of the back of the tapestry; the mysterious strands that make up the communion of saints. Whether scorching in the arid deserts of the sixth century or wasting among the painted glass and pressed ferns of an outmoded gentility, all are seen as at a lightning flash to be one body in Christ.

Reviews

THE SERMONS OF THE CURÉ OF ARS, translated by Una Morrissy; Mercier Press, n.p.

THE OCCASIONAL SERMONS OF RONALD KNOX, edited by Philip Caraman S.J.; Burns Oates, 42s.

These two preachers lived almost exactly one hundred years apart: John Vianney died in 1859 and Ronald Knox in 1957, and during that century both the manners of men and the life of the Church, as well as the ideas of oratory, underwent great changes. Both preachers used scripts (John in his early days only, Ronald always) and John always learned his script by heart, while Ronald always read his and would never preach without one. Both prepared their scripts most conscientiously, John seeking for adequate rhetorical expression—for he knew exactly what he wanted to say—and Ronald researching in history and letters for adequate presentation. Both were preachers whom people flocked to hear; both were holy men. And both in these volumes have been exceedingly well served by their introducers, Lancelot Sheppard and Philip Caraman.

But the two preachers could hardly be more unlike: on the one hand Ronald's urbane scholarship, polished diction, knowledge of the Bible, studied historical allusions and quiet delivery, addressing English people gathered for an occasion; and on the other hand John's peasant manner of a country priest, with his rhetoric consciously borrowed from eighteenth-century orators, his almost exclusive concern with direct moral exhortation, interspersed with anecdotes (many borrowed) and gaily imagined conversations of sinners, all addressed Sunday by Sunday to a French country audience of over a hundred years ago. Yet both preachers in their own age and in their own milieu were to their hearers a powerful source of inspiration.

John Vianney knew little theology—of the kind one finds in books—and the sermons here all belong to his first years of trying to bring the difficult parishioners of Ars to a sense of elementary Christian virtue. He came to Ars